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on the 28<sup>th</sup>

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*A Good Place to Work* Susan Johnson

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### Word Worth's Site of the Month The Classics Network

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## *You Do What You Have to Do*

by Marien Helz

I got in touch with a former colleague recently, and we were discussing topics as varied as families and world events. In the course of the conversation, Pat mentioned that her son's friends were shocked that the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski's, family were the ones who had turned him in.

"My mother would turn me in," her son had told them.

"Darned right I would," she had responded.

"You see," she elaborated to me, "if you don't turn him in, you have to kill him yourself."

Killing him yourself is, of course, not an option—neither morally, legally, nor psychologically. Consequently, turning him in has to be if one is not to become an accessory morally as well as legally to any future murders committed.

Pat's son realized that his mother would turn him in if he violated what was clearly right when he was in middle school. Pat had gone back to work when her children were old enough to be on their own after school. Her son decided to play hooky for several days. Knowing that the school would phone his home after he was absent for three days, his sister tried to convince him to tell their parents. He waited until just before the phone call would come and then told them—whereupon Pat and her husband both took off from work and went into the school.

"Couldn't you just send a note saying I was sick?" her son asked, horrified, "That's what all the other parents do."

Anyone who has ever been around children knows that "what all the others do" can mean anywhere from one other to all the other kids in his or her peer group. What was apparent, however, is that some parents did send in notes saying that their child was sick after the child revealed the dishonesty. When parents behave this way, they are conveying to the child that it is acceptable to decide that they can flout any regulations they choose at their whim. They are also teaching that dishonesty is acceptable—dishonesty to the school in the form of the parents blatantly lying, dishonesty to the parents in terms of the child lying about being in school, and collusion between the parents and child in lying about the absence.

The lying parents apparently feel backed against the wall—too humiliated or too pusillanimous to allow their child to take the consequences deserved. When this continues, sooner or later, there will be consequences for behavior that the parents' lies and collusion will not be sufficient to get the child out of. Sooner or later, when the parents teach their children that such disrespect for them is acceptable, the children will behave disrespectfully to their parents in such a way that will either effect a deep rift or will allow the relationship to disintegrate to the point of abusiveness.

The realization that you have to be ready to turn in even the person you love most in the world if they violate what is clearly acceptable behavior is part of Pat's *You do what you have to do* outlook on life.

What I wonder is why there are so few people in recent generations who understand the *You do what you have to do modus operandi*. In American culture all our heroes are those who followed the *You do what you have to do* philosophy of living—everyone from our nation's founders to the rescue workers during the *Nine-Eleven* calamity.

I suspect that most people know of a situation, as I do, in which parents defended their child against authorities in underage drinking violations. In one such case, the son later died in an alcohol related crash. Supporting one's kin especially one's offspring has gone ridiculously far in some cases—to the point at which there are those who neglect to transfer or adhere to deeply held values.

Theoretically, the failure to respect the authority which upholds values may have been influenced by such things as the Nazi culture in which "following orders" was an excuse for horrendous violations—or by our own Viet Nam war, which although it was opposed by many in our country, continued beyond reason. In instances such as those, a disenchantment with regulations and authority may naturally follow, and generations growing up under the shadows of those events may have internalized a suspicion of authority and its regulations.

Yet a genuine questioning of authority when necessary is far from the irrational excuses for violating any of the

regulations implemented for the purpose of making coexistence with one another feasible.

Most of us generally agree on basic values. It is when flagrant and short-term self interest blinds us to those values that corruption ensues—corruption as large as examples we've seen lately which have devastated international companies or as apparently minor as allowing a school child to get away with something he or she knows is not right. Every CEO was once a school child who was either made to follow or was not made to follow the rules.

We'll all be better off, and we'll all live better lives, if we adhere to and celebrate the *You do what you have to do* philosophy of living.

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## *A Good Place to Work*

by Susan Johnson

There are almost as many business models as there are CEOs available to head them. Centralized, decentralized, and matrix are just a few types that fade in and out of popularity, inhabiting the corporate-speak of their respective eras. The best business model, the *good place to work* (*GPTW*) model is rarely mentioned and difficult to find.

A *GPTW* revolves around one all-consuming tenet—mutual trust and respect among everyone in the company. So, if it's such a great model, why doesn't everyone use it?—because creating a good place to work is fairly easy when a company is small but as the company grows, it gets harder to maintain. It requires constant vigilance. Yet, the larger the company, the greater the benefits of keeping it a good place to work. Some who haven't actually experienced working in such a place may admit that it seems worth the effort from an intellectual standpoint without realizing that the benefits extend with an equal if not greater impact to the financial aspects of the company.

Essentially, the model takes all the niceties, the good manners shall we say, of a small business and protects them as a company grows. For instance, in a small company, time clocks are unnecessary for several reasons. The first is that everyone knows each other—usually pretty well—so there is created the feeling of obligation among the members of the company. Secondly, in most of these small groups, everyone notices when everyone else comes to work. The result of this is that employee number one, if he respects employee number two, doesn't feel morally right about arriving fifteen minutes late on a daily basis and then leaving on time. He knows that employee number two is aware of his comings and goings and will sooner or later be disappointed and feel cheated by this behavior.

When companies grow to include employees numbered in the hundreds and thousands, you can see how employee number one and employee number one-thousand-three-hundred-fifty-seven might not know each other, and therefore cannot feel an obligation to one another. Further, they have no idea when the other comes or goes. This anonymity spreads both vertically and laterally as the company continues to grow and as newcomers replace veterans.

After a certain population point, it is almost impossible to prevent anonymity. It becomes inevitable that some, if not many, employees will not know each other. Is it still possible to retain an ethos of mutual trust and respect? Yes. How?—by management refusing to allow the company to behave differently from a small company: refusing to give in to time clocks and other mistrustful surveillance devices, maintaining a first-name opened-door policy for everyone, treating every single employee as a responsible intelligent adult, continuing to pay above average wages and expecting above-average performance, providing benefits that lead to genuine financial security, and believing that every single person in the company is on a “need-to-know” basis. On the face of it, these principles seem easy enough to fulfill. In truth, the company that wants to abide by them will find them tough to carry out.

Here's why. In a large company, there inevitably comes the time, regardless of every effort otherwise, when someone dishonest is hired. That person will sooner or later need to be disciplined in a way that singles them out and creates punishment for no one else—both at the time—and in the future as a preventive means (the creation of rules to prevent future problems will be very tempting but the allure of this safeguard must not be allowed to seduce management into changing the environment for everyone else).

Secondly, there will be an honest person hired who finds it impossible, for some reason, to trust others. This person will want to establish their own rules, use surveillance devices, and treat others in an unacceptable fashion. People of this nature will usually do some damage before they're noticed and will then need to be counseled until they're capable of trusting others. In the event that they're incapable of learning to trust, they will need to be terminated—a difficult thing to do to those who otherwise work hard, but a step that must be taken to protect the culture.

Thirdly, in a large company, it will take more time to communicate equally and in a timely manner with everyone: a critical component of a community built on mutual trust and respect. In times of stress, tight schedules, production problems—exactly the times when the last item on management's critical to-do list wants to be to stop and have a chat with the troops—communication will be all the more necessary. And, this communication from the top of the company will need to be conducted in a shirt-sleeves environment regardless of the number of layers of management that may have developed. It will also need to be interactive and management will need to seek help and advice from everyone, again a move contradictory to some types of management. (Layers of management are, in and of themselves, another problem, but not necessarily one that prohibits a *GPTW* model.)

By this point, some readers may wonder if it's worth the effort. Let's examine the benefits.

Company dynamics vary from place to place but in almost every case, employees want to know what's going on in their environment and to have control over it to the extent possible. They want their value to the company acknowledged and will be interested in knowing the value of other employees to the company.

When employees don't know what's going on in their workplace, it's a fact that they will spend a lot of time trying to find out. And, if they are unhappy with what's going on, they will either leave the company, resulting in the considerable and unnecessary cost of replacement, or they will spend time trying to change the situation. In both cases, time that could have been used productively, toward a common goal, is instead wasted, spent going down a fractured sidetrack, reducing productivity.

In a somewhat more subtle fashion, distrust among employees within a company leads to wasted time as well. When people distrust one another and they subsequently differ in opinion, both are less likely to make the leaps of faith that constantly occur at a company where trust is pervasive. Instead of respecting each other's values and expertise, and quickly participating in a search for solutions, the two will usually not readily try to see things from each other's perspective, feeling more strongly the need to first assign blame.

Where there is mutual trust and respect, the search for solutions begins without delay.

There is also usually a difference in the effect of successes, and, in a *GPTW*, one person's accomplishment or success—i.e. a new patent, an important sale, a published white paper, the launch of a new product, can be immediately enjoyed by and is reflected on everyone in the company, bestowing on them the pleasure and pride of many accomplishments, not just their own. This culture ignites strong loyalty in employees and encourages further accomplishments and cooperation by everyone.

Whether or not a *GPTW* has more successes than they might otherwise is difficult to measure. However, it's clear that there are many types of failures that they will not have. Since a *GPTW* implicitly has strong ethics—because to behave otherwise would be to behave mistrustfully and to disrespect one's fellow employees—failures of the type suffered by Enron and Adelphia cannot happen.

That everyone feels a responsibility to do their job in the best way possible for similar reasons would suggest that a company with this environment would enjoy greater profitability. Add this benefit to the effect of little wasted time coupled with a fractional turnover rate, and it's possible to see how a *GPTW* can afford to pay its employees a higher than average wage. Since good people are attracted to the company for reasons of its culture and its pay, the company is able to hire the best people available. A self-fulfilling destiny is created.

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# Photography by Armin W Helz circa 1940-1976



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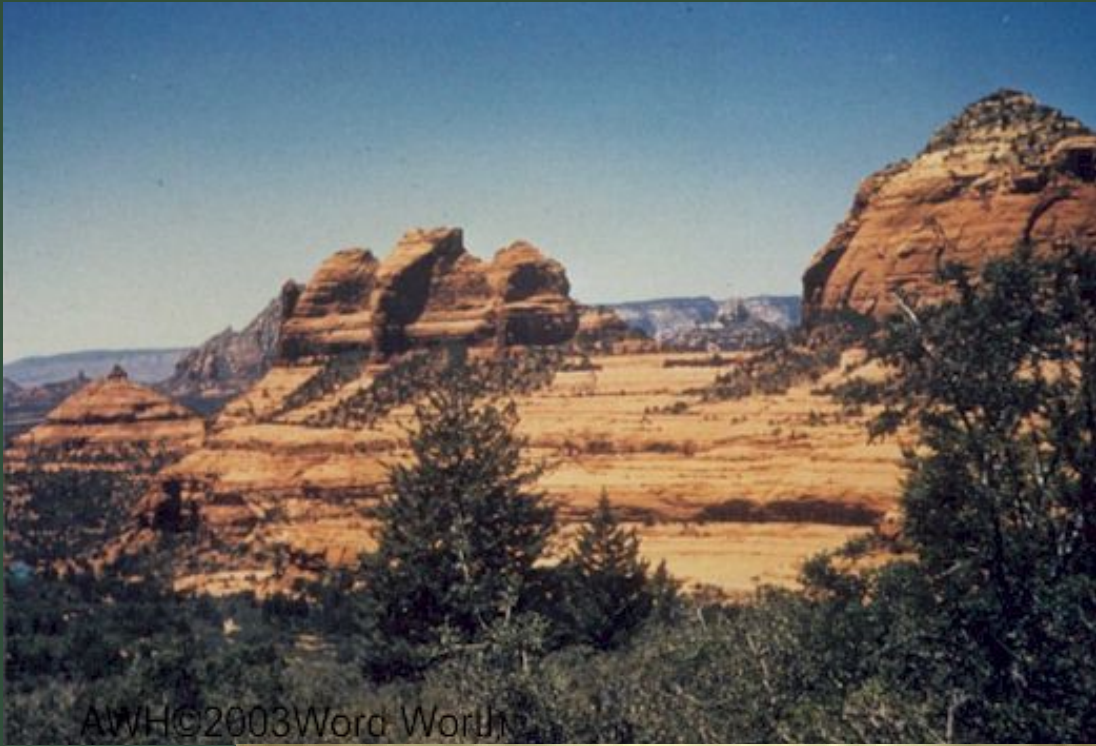
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